

ART AND MORAL FORMATION CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

The November 10, 2017 conference on Art and Moral Formation in Jefferson City at Lincoln University was comprised of the following papers.

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1 Reconciliation and Preconditions of Existence: Normative Mythological Foundations in the Poetry of Robert Frost

Bryan G. Salmons

Traditional mythologies serve...four functions, the first of which might be described as the reconciliation of consciousness with the preconditions of its own existence.

Joseph Campbell, "The Four Functions of Mythology"

Campbell's elucidation of the purposes of mythology extends, quite naturally, to be a useful lens for organizing the primary functions of all narrative expression. Moreover, he subtly but convincingly upends the Aristotelian notion, per *Poetics*, of *mimesis*, or imitation, as being primary by listing his four functions progressively and placing the mimetic aspect second (with sociological and psychological aspects filling out the roster respectively). In other words, according to Campbell, first our art must map the figurative topography of our world. Only then can it proceed to depict the particularities thereof.

And it is a unified world, singular, that Campbell assumes. We might thereby conclude that this is lesson number one: no pluralizing of existence. His very progression insists upon it: before we can emplace the nuances of groupings and mind states, first we must agree upon the limitations of possibility. Milton's Satan may have had a point beyond casuistry when he said "The mind is its own place and in itself/Can make a Hell of Heav'n, A Heav'n of Hell," but he utters his words in the aftermath of a crushing defeat, and the fact of his expulsion will not be undone.

Now, within the context of our theme—moral formation—it may be rightly pointed out that Campbell's great philosophical forebear is Schopenhauer, he of the "world as will and idea." Indeed, especially following his popular apotheosis as mystic-for-our-time via his widely-disseminated interviews with Bill Moyers in the 1980s, Campbell's philosophical trappings became obscured to the point of confusion. But he very consistently remained throughout his career a genuine Pessimist in the Schopenhauer mold, i.e. one who affirms Idealism while insisting on the preponderance of suffering.

As such, it could be objected that Campbell's "preconditions" make for poor morality, since at best they are only an unyielding insistence upon the immutability of unpleasantness and at worst they are the animating anxieties of all manner of egomania. This would appear poor stuff out of which to formulate generalized rules for living, let alone such that may distinguish right from wrong.

But, of course, Campbell's affinity with Schopenhauer extends even to this qualifying extent: truth, sans ironical quotation marks, is concomitant with good. And even more remarkably, the aesthetic may be judged upon its fealty to truth, and therefore good. Thus, when a given creation

adheres to the preconditions of existence, it is or can be morally edifying and-- to a given extent--formative.

So, besides an insistence upon “one world,” what are some of the other preconditions Campbell identifies? We might assume, rather sweepingly, that mortality is a quite obvious precondition of existence. But that is overdrawn. In Campbell’s analysis—again mimicking Schopenhauer—there are at least three issues comprised by the general category of “death”: 1. The Sisyphean futility and inherent incoherence of existence; 2. Suffering that is necessitated by that precondition when matched with a human being’s tendency toward desire or vanity; 3. The ultimate crucible of choice between an embrace of the quixotic and a refusal of the struggle, i.e. “to be or not to be.”

Before I discuss some works by Frost in light of the foregoing, it might be useful to note that I do not intend to suggest that his work is singular in its reflection of these preconditions. On the contrary—I see all of these elements quite prominently in literature as varied as *the Iliad*, *Hamlet*, *Don Quixote*, all the novels of Hardy, Mann, and Cormac McCarthy, and much of the poetry of Wallace Stevens and John Koethe. In effect, I see some of these themes practically everywhere. Once one is conscious of the motif, it recurs so frequently that it cannot “unrecommend” itself.

In that, it reminds me of a story I once read about scientists who had identified a toxin in some soil samples and—hoping to provide some basis for expressing its threat to the environment—kept broadening their sample size. The toxin continued to turn up in every successive sample and in amounts the scientists had once thought aberrant. Eventually, after they had tested enough samples to account for an area the size of large state, they were forced to conclude that—though still undeniably deleterious of existence—the toxin was so ubiquitous that there was no basis for remedy. In other words, people just had to live with it.

In this, then, neither Frost nor his works is unique. Rather, my attention to his work is motivated by a conviction that it is uniquely distilled along lines highly similar to Campbell’s formulation of preconditions. That he “got there” apparently independent of Schopenhauer only, in my view, argues for the validity of the overall assertion, viz. that life comes with provisos with which we must contend and whose reality, if you will, is discrete from our formulations.

Frost was a therapeutic nihilist. Not officially, of course—that would be anachronistic. He probably never knew much of an Austrian intellectual café movement from the first few decades of the twentieth century, but he was a kindred spirit. In essence, the therapeutic nihilist asserts that the real ills of the world defy curing. You can draft legislation, start an NPO, donate to your church and the American Cancer Society, volunteer your life away, or even become an assassin, but you’ll never solve the real problems, because the real problems are *sic semper* (thus always; too bad Booth knew the Latin but didn’t get the point).

And his “real ills” are remarkably consistent in form and character with Campbell’s preconditions: that we live in one world independent of imaginative variation; that there is no comprehensible order in the world except that which we have the will to establish and maintain; that pain is an unavoidable consequence of our inevitable struggle; that we must choose between the negation of a futile existence and the embrace of a harrowing one. And to this last, Frost adds his own particularizing caveat: choices are forever, and you’ll never know with certainty whether the choice was correct. It was Seamus Heaney who once observed of Frost that his entire poetic manner seems to reside within the implied, fortitudinous challenge of “I’m ok; what about you?” That’s quite right, and the larger meaning behind Trilling’s famous characterization of Frost as “terrifying.” He takes us to the root of our fears via bucolic settings and by doing no more than inviting us to walk with him as he repairs the preconditions that lie figuratively yet insistently in field, swale, tree, and wall.

Upon the point of an ultimately irreducible world, we begin with “Mending Wall,” a 45-line dramatic monologue perhaps most famous in non-literary circles for being among the very few pieces of literature ever cited in a Supreme Court decision (1995, *Plaut v. Spendthrift Farms*; Justices Scalia and Breyer). But we consider it here for its deftly constructed rhetoric of inevitability underpinned with a deliciously fatalistic irony.

For those unfamiliar with the text, in sum it features a springtime ritual of repairing a rock wall undertaken by two neighbors. One, the narrator, at first ruminates upon and then begins to question aloud the obvious redundancy, futility, and dubious reasonableness of this ritual. Two lines in particular underscore his stance: “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” repeated twice (line 1 and line 35), and, in answer to his neighbor’s aphoristic insistence that “good fences make good neighbors” (lines 27 and 45), the question, “*Why* do they make good neighbors?” (line 30). The other neighbor is portrayed rather unflatteringly by our speaker as an atavistic and insular character, an “old-stone savage armed” (line 40) who “moves in darkness” (41). That he is given the last word—a re-emphasis of his aphorism—is often taken as a kind of defeat for the more enlightened perspective of the narrator.

But the somewhat simple moralism of a thinker defeated by the intransigence of a rube is, of course, a classic Frostian red herring and undone—in this case—by a single fact: it is the narrator who initiates the ritual (line 12: “I let my neighbor know beyond the hill”). This single, ironic line is devastating to any reading of the monologue that would regard the narrator as somehow distinct or excluded from the ritual and all it embodies symbolically. For all of his cleverness and impish prodding of his comparatively slow-witted companion, he is not exempted from either the necessity of wall repair nor its implications.

Among those implications is of course the idea that boundaries—however motivated by a savage or even feral suspicion of “other”—are pragmatic necessities that survive even the deconstruction of their practical justification. But further is the implication of ineradicable

boundaries themselves. Wanted or not, justified or not, comprehensible or not—they persist, unmoved by mental acuity or imaginative desire.

At times Frost can be much more direct and absolute in such pronouncements. An example would be the lyrical “Nothing Gold Can Stay”:

Nature’s first green is gold,

Her hardest hue to hold.

Her early leaf’s a flower;

But only so an hour.

Then leaf subsides to leaf.

So Eden sank to grief,

So dawn goes down to day.

Nothing gold can stay.

A summary of the rhetoric itself is virtually a synopsis of cyclical determinism: nature, first, early, only, hour, subside, sink, grief, down, nothing. The only qualifying words attach to the hopeful aspects of the first four lines; the last four are causally inevitable and absolute. This sketch, if you will, invites no exception.

But it is my view that Frost’s most devilishly ensnaring poem—in the context of binding us, as it were, within given confines—is the sonnet “Design.” Cleverly mimicking the stanzaic arrangement of an Italian sonnet (octave/sestet) while incorporating the internal trappings of the English variety (*ottava rima*, closing couplet, and tripartite perspective), the poem depicts a grotesque scene that for the speaker begs several impertinent (and theological) questions. A white spider has taken up residence in a flower (“the heal-all,” or *prunella vulgaris*) that provides camouflage only by chance: normally blue, it is a mold, or blight, that has changed its hue. Within the spider’s grasp is a dead or dying white moth. The sestet says it all:

What had that flower to do with being white,

The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?

What brought the spider to that height,

Then steered the white moth thither in the night?

What but design of darkness to appall?

If design govern in a thing so small.

(lines 9--14)

Rather like his spider, Frost has us trapped as the moth between two unpalatable conclusions: random chance that can yield such unlikely horror or determinism that yields certain destruction. And while many have tended to emphasize the cosmological ambiguity the series of questions recommends, I'm more compelled by the reinforcing message the prosody, which is only cosmetically ambiguous, delivers. The poem itself is an ingenious and inescapable trap, and it would seem that preferring the possibility of chance is an accession to illusion, a refusal of the weight of the evidence.

What is often considered Frost's first "great" poem—"Mowing"—makes clear his position regarding the necessity of the Will to Order, i.e. the primacy of imaginative exertion in negating or ordering the inherently impersonal, inchoate, and indeed chaotic nature of this unified reality we call life. "Mowing" was the central piece in Frost's first official collection (he had previously published a chap book, *Into My Own*), *A Boy's Will* (1913), and is also an irregular sonnet as well as the poem he most often cited as demonstrative of his theory of the "sound of sense."

The two "halves," if you will, of "Mowing" form an argument. The octave is a rumination. While describing the setting and action in which a scythe is being wielded on an overgrown pasture, there is a conspicuous accumulation of words that indicate absence, loneliness, inarticulacy, and isolation: "never," "one," "whispering" (three times in variance), "not" (three times), "myself," "perhaps" (twice), "lack," and "no." The sestet answers the implication of these terms:

Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak

To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,

Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers

(Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.

The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.

My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.

(lines 9—14)

The metaphor is unignorable: just as the purpose of mowing—a difficult labor that achieves no permanence—is an ordering that must be accepted as self-justifying, so all forms of laborious "ordering" are to be regarded. What is achieved is a form of truth, and Frost is very pointed in rejecting alternatives (the speaker derides "gift(s) of idle hours" and "easy gold of fey or elf," i.e. romanticism/escapism) as inferior or illusory. The only true alternative—a Hobson's choice per Frost—is chaos.

In order to discover why Frost found chaos, as such, so repulsive, we must look at one his last great poems, “Desert Places,” written three decades after “Mowing.” Here, utilizing a rather disjunctive set of four quatrains that echo yet elide the regressive *terza rima* form he famously employed in “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening,” there is another contemplation of a snow-filled vista. The circumstance is unclear, and I’ve often thought the speed of the observations coupled with the distinct discontinuity suggest a passenger on a train (as opposed to the stationary horse rider of “Stopping by Woods”), but at any rate we begin with a rather terse description of a barren winter scene:

Snow falling and night falling, fast, oh, fast
In a field I looked into going past,
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

(lines 1—4)

The speaker then broadens his consideration to the surrounding woods and countryside, noting he too is a part of this tableau (“The loneliness includes me unawares”). The third stanza succumbs to the incipient depression of the second’s projection of loneliness (“lonely as it is, that loneliness/Will be more ere it will be less”), and we appear to be headed toward a rare conclusion for a Frost poem: defeat.

But the fourth stanza enacts a bizarre turn:

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars—on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer some
To scare myself with my own desert places.

(lines 13—16)

First, there is the jarring invocation of “they” after all the emphasis of loneliness. And who are *they*, exactly? Astronomers, apparently, given “their” alleged pronouncements concerning stars and vast emptiness. But second, we arrive unexpectedly back where Frost so often takes us—but this time with notable truculence: *that’s big...but I’m bigger than that*.

In effect, then, Frost chastens in “Desert Places” the prophets of science, in the form of astronomers, for asking the wrong questions. Instead of “Are we all alone?” or “Is this [material] all there is?”, “he’s rather asking “Will I be or remain equal to the task of meaningful ordering?” In saying “they cannot scare me” and “I have it in me,” he is saying that he has always known that nothingness was the consequence, the default setting, of the world writ large. The only real issue is whether imagination is capable of combating it.

But that combat, if you will, takes a toll, and just as the entropic decay affects his mending wall, Frost depicts the decline of will in “After Apple Picking.” And that inevitable weariness that ends with death brings us to the subject of suffering born of desire. The speaker in “After Apple Picking” admits his condition and qualifies it as consequential of his ambition:

For I have had too much
Of apple-picking: I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired
(lines 27—29)

If we take the harvesting of the apples as metaphorical of the development of knowledge—and the configuration of the world within an intelligible frame—we may interpret these lines as something of a self-admonition, though one redolent of futile lament: if I hadn’t gone at this quite so hard, perhaps I wouldn’t be at the point of collapse. But, of course, as we already know, Frost doesn’t really see a genuine alternative, and the speaker goes off to his slumber not knowing whether his figurative rest will be either temporary—like the cyclical hibernation of a woodchuck—or “just...human,” i.e., paradoxically both brief and permanent per the tenor and vehicle of the symbol.

“To Earthward” offers a contrasting attitude to the sleepy defeatism of “After Apple Picking.” First of all, it is sensual and robust, even defiantly so. The almost-lewd sexuality inherent in words like “love,” “lips,” “touch,” “flow,” “musk,” “ache,” “spray,” “stain,” “stiff,” “sore,” “hand,” “hard,” and “length” is obviously intentional, unusual for Frost (although not without concord—see “The Silken Tent”), and almost always shocking when pointed out to my students. But the poem is “about” more than rough sex; rather, it’s more fully about an attitude of mature embrace of the pain of existence. Campbell has written of initiation rituals in what he terms the “primitive” world.

...where direct confrontations with brutal bloody facts of life are inescapable and unremitting . [The ceremonies] to which growing youngsters are subjected are frequently horrendous, confronting them in the most appalling, vivid terms, with experiences...of this monstrous thing that is life: and always with the requirement of ‘yea,’ with no sense of either personal or collective guilt, but gratitude and exhilaration (180)

In reading “To Earthward,” one recognizes that Frost would not think such ceremonies primitive at all. On the contrary, the speaker dismisses the pleasures of his youth, when he “lived on air” and “craved strong sweets.”

Now no joy but lacks salt,
That is not dashed with pain
And weariness and fault;
I crave the stain
Of tears, the aftermark
Of almost too much love,
The sweet of bitter bark
And burning clove.
When stiff and sore and scarred
I take away my hand
From leaning on it hard
In grass and sand,
The hurt is not enough:
I long for the weight and strength
To feel the earth as rough
To all my length.
(lines 17—32)

There is indeed exhilaration and gratitude in these lines, the sanguine belief that the diminishment of nerve endings and taste buds that physically necessitates “harder” impulses and stimuli are a trustworthy analogue to a spiritual existence that is closer to truth, an undeniable good.

But I would be remiss if I did not delve a bit into what I see as Frost's addition to the list of preconditions—what we may call the cruel inscrutability of choices. The theme is everywhere, frankly, in his oeuvre: in the playful invitation of "The Pasture" ("You come too"); the desperate threat of the scorned husband in "Home Burial" ("I'll follow and bring you back by force. I will!"); the casual misogyny of "The Sound of Trees" (Some day...I shall be gone"); and most especially in the dramatic turning away from disillusion at the end of "Stopping by Woods" ("But I have promises to keep"). Frost's personae are frequently poised like casually tossed coins above a determinative earth. That he found choices—particularly what he termed possibly "reckless" choices (in "The Sound of Trees")—so ubiquitous and therefore unavoidable is readily apparent by their prominence throughout his work. But the poem that most thoroughly explores the issue, and most vividly demonstrates the cruel aspect of what we may call human choices, is "The Road Not Taken."

It is among his most well-known works. I seldom go long in my life without meeting a relative stranger who, upon learning that I am a Frost scholar, will readily recite the poem's famous opening pentet:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth

(lines 1—5)

There was a time when I detested the poem for this very reason. There was something about its popularity that made it seem shallow to me, and I found it relatively easy to ignore in my studies, secure in my conviction that it was obviously not a "serious" piece of work, that it was silly in the way that the Stones' "Satisfaction" is silly: a jokey, half-baked idea that took on a life of its own once it reached the public. So I rejected it...until I had an epiphany.

I was re-reading Lathem's full collection of Frost's works in preparation for my dissertation defense, and one day I turned the page and there it was: "The Road Not Taken." From somewhere inside the voice of Ricardo Montalban as Khan in the second *Star Trek* movie—channeling Melville's Captain Ahab-- leaped into my mind: "With my last breath...I spit at thee." Nonetheless, I drew a sigh, and read, and...started to cry. The tears were dotting the page before I was even aware of how immensely sad I had suddenly become. Not knowing what had come over me, I read again...and began to sob even harder. I was at work, and my door was open onto a heavily-trafficked hallway, so I was suddenly in terror of being seen. I packed up

my things and went home, still hitching in my chest the whole way there. And I still, even after I gathered myself, had no idea what had just happened.

More than half suspecting that I was losing my mind—perhaps from the stress of the dissertation process—I decided to go for a long walk and try to get a handle on what to do. Should I seek help? Remember, as far as I was concerned this was no more sensible than bursting into tears over a beer jingle. Clearly I was unstable. Then, about a mile on my walk into what was, in fact, a yellow wood, it hit me: “The Road Not Taken” wasn’t shallow. It never had been; I was.

The key is in the last stanza:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference
(lines 16—20)

Contrary to popular interpretation, “The Road Not Taken” is not an affirmation of independence or self-determination (one reason why it is often misnamed “The Road Less Travelled”). Rather, it is a ruthlessly vivid and achingly pure meditation on an unavoidable fact: we must and will choose among and between incompatible directions in life. We will always remember having made the more excruciating choices, and we will likely be certain that some difference—notably uncharacterized in the poem—has been effected. But what we cannot—indeed shall not—ever know, is whether we chose “correctly.”

So why did I cry? Because I had just made an excruciating life choice. My then wife had left me, moved to a far northern state, and then in effect said, “Join me, or say goodbye.” I thought about it as long as she would allow, which turned out to be the better part of autumn. Then I said goodbye. But I wasn’t in any way certain that I was right. In fact, I’d say I rather more suspected pride had corrupted my deliberations. And reading “The Road Not Taken” that day made me realize that I would never know, that—as Frost puts it—“way leads on to way” (line 14), and not only was that alternative path soon to be an overgrown and distant mystery but also that I could torture myself for the rest of my days about some alternative “me” living out a different (“better” was the real fear) existence on that path.

And though I was not a child in years, I shamefully realized Frost had shown me that until very recently I remained one in understanding. Whether by chance or design, I had managed to live over thirty years without making any truly hard choices. And now that I had made one, I was caught in an illusion—perhaps that I could go this way and realistically imagine my way in the

other, but also that in keeping the memory of the divergence vivid I might find a future intersection between the two. I saw with vividness that day that it could not be—"way leads on to way," and any alternative is pure illusion.

So—to hopefully bring this full circle—when I assert that Campbell and Frost provide ample evidence for moral formation in literature, which I can only interpret in my limited fashion and according to their lights to mean "a sense of what is true and therefore, at minimum, usefully good," it is with both an awareness of the literature and—just as importantly—because I have experienced the good within their stern and admittedly forbidding medicine. And while I don't feel it is quite as cynical as my favorite line from *The Princess Bride*—"Life is pain; anyone who says differently is selling something"—it is tough stuff. It asks if you have the courage to accept what life is, as it is, and still say, "I'm ok. How about you?"

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2 Comments on the Preconditions of Existence

Bruce W. Ballard

First of all, thanks to Bryan for a very thoughtful paper clearly in his area of expertise. I have engaged the material philosophically, hopefully without distorting it.

A poem is not an argument though it can draw us to the same conclusion as an argument would. But if not by argument, then by what means? ...by appealing to our emotions through the aesthetic.

The Frost/Joseph Campbell worldview is mistakenly stark. It is posed as a choice between two available directions: "We must choose between the negation of a futile existence and the embrace of a harrowing one." Here Frost comes close to Camus' identification of suicide as the central issue for philosophy but without the skyward fist-shaking. Frost adds that we will never know whether our choices were right. But given his belief in the absurdity of the universe, it is hard to imagine what 'right choice' could mean. But in any case, John Hick clearly shows that, e.g. Christianity, if true, would eventuate in a day of verification.

More to the point, the preferred choices make for a false dichotomy. Heidegger warns us how important our initial apprehension of any phenomenon will be for later interpretation. Here we might also consider Kant's 3 questions for philosophy: What can I know? What ought I to do? and What may I hope? Frost appears to clip off the third question. As for morality, Bryan correctly notes that "it could be objected that Campbell's "preconditions" make for poor morality, since at best they are only an unyielding insistence upon the immutability of unpleasantness and at worst they are the animating anxieties of all manner of egomania." When we do reconcile our existence with the preconditions, we may morally edify. That is, if it is morally edifying to acquiesce to amoral fatalism. Nor does the failure to locate a basis for moral

obligation help Frost's cause. Indeed his nihilism leaves the door wide open for "all manner of egomania." But egomania is a term of disapprobation which here is without basis.

A third possibility for worldview would be in the category of what we might hope for. Aquinas's Argument from Desire pertains here. It runs as follows:

1. All natural desires can be satisfied. (Not at all times, obviously, but generally speaking)
2. The desire to know the meaning and origin of life is natural (witness the occurrence of religion in virtually every culture).
3. Therefore, the origin and meaning of life can be known
4. Knowledge of the origin and meaning of life is beyond human power
5. The origin and meaning of life have to be revealed to us by the maker of same.

We noted at the outset that poetry persuades by appealing to our emotions through aesthetic means. It can do this in a number of ways. Two of these ways are the intensification of a rhetoric and the vivid portrayal of an image. The fourth stanza of *Stopping by Woods on a snowy Evening* does both of these: They cannot scare me with their empty spaces. Between stars—on stars where no human race is. I have it in me so much nearer some. To scare myself with my own desert places.

I can only say that the attempt to overwhelm with size scale must fail. To say that we are insignificant due to our relative size vis a vis the universe is to commit a fallacy we might call the cosmological fallacy. If that were the true measure, then large, obese people would be more meaningful than short, slight people, an absurdity.

4 Reaction to “The Psychology of Confederate Symbols”

Kurt A. DeBord

In her presentation entitled, “The Psychology of Confederate Symbols,” Dr. Mara Aruguete made the case that such symbols, like the Confederate flag and statues of Confederate military leaders, serve to unconsciously trigger reactions in White viewers that lead to increased levels of racial bias and, ultimately, discriminatory behavior against people who are African-American. This reaction paper is designed to highlight the strengths in the case that she made and to propose that caution be used when generalizing the conclusions of her presentation to others situations and contexts.

Aruguete based her argument about the divisiveness of Confederate symbols on the concept of ingroup bias, a well-known and well-researched social psychological concept first proposed by Gordon Allport (1954) that contends that human beings have a natural tendency to favor those who are familiar and similar. The flipside of this concept is that unfamiliar and dissimilar others (the outgroup) are typically devalued by most people. Aruguete stated that Confederate monuments have served as a way for White, southern people to claim power by taking over public spaces with these symbols that trigger ingroup bias among other White southerners. She discussed research showing that Black people are more likely to see Confederate symbols as symbols of hate whereas White people are more likely to see them as symbols of heritage. Ironically, the more White southerners supported the use of the Confederate flag, the less well they scored on a test of general Civil War knowledge, according to Aruguete.

After describing the background of Confederate symbols and the meaning of ingroup bias, Aruguete posed the question, “Do Confederate symbols influence behavior?” She

answered her own question by describing two well-designed studies that clearly demonstrated that such symbols did, indeed, affect the behavior of White participants. One study showed how the subliminal presentation of a Confederate flag made White participants less likely to support Black candidates in an election. The other showed how exposure to the Confederate flag led White participants to more negatively evaluate a fairly neutral personality profile of a Black person. With these effects documented, Aruguete went on to question the degree to which having the Mississippi state flag (which has a Confederate flag embedded in it) present in Mississippi courtrooms might negatively impact the decisions of primarily White juries when dealing with Black defendants. She concluded by discussing research that showed how the presence of the American flag tends to make U.S. citizens more biased against perceived outgroup members.

Overall, Aruguete made a compelling case against allowing the presence of Confederate symbols in public spaces. However, I was left with some reservations as to the degree to which her conclusions could be generalized, resulting in the claim that nearly any symbol that triggers ingroup biases could have negative and discriminatory effects on members of an outgroup. The originator of the term, Gordon Allport, did not agree. Further, a review of the research (Brewer, 1999) indicated that ingroup preference and outgroup hate were not necessarily reciprocally related, but instead were independent. Some research indicates that identifying with an ingroup can serve to boost self-esteem. This could be especially useful amongst groups that have traditionally been stigmatized by majority society. For instance, research on sexual and gender minorities indicates that identifying with perceived similar others can enhance self-esteem, resilience, and positive self-perceptions (Riggle and Rostosky, (2012). Thus, the presence of a

rainbow flag during a pride parade would seem more likely to inspire a sense of having a valued and important place in society, not a sense of hatred of heterosexual or cisgendered people.

Even though not all flags or symbols might generate antipathy toward an outgroup, it seems quite likely that Confederate symbols do. Given the violent history and menacing implications of the Confederate flag, along with the research presented by Aruguete, I am in strong support of having all Confederate symbols removed from publicly owned places. I would be happy if no one ever had to see one again.

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Plato, Socrates, and Confederate Monuments

Scott Berman

Though there has been controversy around the country about whether to remove Confederate monuments, I will not engage in that debate in this paper. Instead, I will examine two different theories about the nature of moral education of the young as it relates to art. I will, though, take as my starting point the assumption that it would be best for everyone if all of the Confederate monuments were removed from our public squares. Why would it be best? First, monuments are, most plausibly, public *endorsements* of the goals of the person or event represented by the monument. Confederate monuments, then, would be public endorsements of the Confederacy. Second, since the Confederacy was founded on the idea of white supremacy, that is, the idea that people with white skin are inherently superior to people with black or brown skin in terms of their cognitive abilities and moral character, which explains why the Confederate States seceded from the Union, that is, to preserve its mechanism for maintaining white supremacy, namely, slavery, the removal of Confederate monuments would be to withdraw any public endorsement of white supremacy, whether it be maintained by slavery, Jim Crow, or any one of the many current mechanisms used to preserve systemic racial inequalities. Third, given that the idea of white supremacy is false, using it to organize the functioning of society harms that society and thereby makes *all* of its members have worse lives than they would have had otherwise, whether they realize it or not. Therefore, it would be better for a society to remove all of its Confederate monuments, given that it is better for a society to not endorse ideas that are harmful to it and its people. (cf. *Republic* III.397e-398b)

But how *exactly* does the public endorsement of a harmful idea harm a society? Plato and Socrates have different explanations as to how this happens and because of that difference have

different answers as to why we should remove the monuments. I shall argue that Socrates gets it right and Plato does not. But let me start with Plato's theory first as it will seem to most people to be the more plausible of the two.

Plato's Theory

Plato thinks that art is representational. Paintings, sculptures, music, plays, poems, stories, dances, and monuments are artistic expressions, that is, representations or imitations, of real things regardless of whether the apparent or surface content of the artistic expression is a real thing or not. For example, the *Iliad* seems to be about Achilles, but as there is no such person, the epic poem cannot be about Achilles, which is nothing at all. So, since the *Iliad*, according to Plato, must be about some real thing, what real thing is it about? Plato would say that the *Iliad* is about what war does to people and societies. That is a real thing. Likewise, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is not about Lady Macbeth, there being no such thing. Rather, *Macbeth* is about a real thing, namely, what lust for control over others does to people. (cf. *Republic* II.377a together the *Ion*)

Plato thinks, also, that there are objective moral truths. These truths are real things. As a parallel, Plato would say, there are objective scientific truths. For example, there is an objective scientific truth concerning parabolanness. Scientists have discovered that parabolanness is a non-linear relation between two magnitudes that we can express using the mathematical equation $y = x^2$. Spatiotemporal parabolas are examples of this non-spatiotemporal nature, which is itself not a parabola. Plato thinks that both the spatiotemporal parabolas and the non-spatiotemporal nature of parabolanness are real things. Parabolanness is a good object of knowledge because, given that it is non-temporal, it is absolutely stable. It cannot change. Spatiotemporal parabolas are not good

objects of knowledge because they, given that they *are* temporal things, can change and hence, they lack the stability required for good objects of knowledge. Nevertheless, spatiotemporal parabolas *are* real things. They are not nothing at all. They are excellent examples of parabolanness but lousy objects of knowledge. Moreover, parabolanness would be a lousy example of parabolanness. Same with redness and red things. Redness is an excellent object of knowledge, but a lousy example of itself. In order for something to be truly red, it has to reflect the longest wavelength of visible light. Redness, being non-spatiotemporal, can't reflect any wavelengths of light, let alone the longest wavelength of visible light. Things in spacetime can reflect electromagnetic radiation, and so, they can actually, that is, truly, be red.

Same with morality. The non-spatiotemporal nature of goodness is a real thing and is a good object of knowledge. The spatiotemporal examples of goodness are also real things. And just as with every spatiotemporal example, they make bad objects of knowledge even though they are true examples of goodness. Likewise, just as parabolanness, $y = x^2$, is an abstract pattern or structure, so is goodness an abstract pattern or structure. And just as parabolas are physical patterns or structures, so good things are physical patterns or structures. In sum, the physical patterns are the manifestations of the abstract patterns. And so, Plato thinks, artistic expressions of any sort are ultimately human-made physical representations of the abstract patterns. The *Iliad* and *Macbeth* are both representations of a complex interwoven manifestation of multiple abstract patterns such as human beingness, badness, the nature of war, the nature of control, and many others. Now what about education?

Plato thinks that we should begin a person's education when they are at their youngest because their minds are at their "most malleable" and take on "any pattern one wishes to impress" upon them. (*Republic* 377ab) Further, given that "the opinions they absorb at that age

are hard to erase and apt to become unalterable...we should probably take the utmost care to insure that the first stories they hear about virtue are the best ones to hear.” (*Republic* 378de)

And by “best” he has in mind the ones that present people and the gods as being morally good and not as being morally bad. Why ought we do this? Because artistic expressions that represent morally bad patterns “produce in the young a strong inclination to do bad things”. (*Republic* 391e-392a). Plato thinks that because he thinks that the more someone experiences a kind of pattern, the more they come to enjoy experiencing that kind of pattern. (Perhaps because it feels familiar and what is familiar is more pleasant than what is unfamiliar?) And so, if someone comes to enjoy the representation of a morally bad pattern, then they will come to enjoy the moral badness it represents. And if one does this from youth, then moral badness will become true of that person’s nature as they grow up. (*Republic* 395cd)

The key assumption of Plato’s theory of education is that young people learn by the repeated exposure to patterns which impress themselves upon the minds of the young, thereby forming those minds into those patterns. If the young are repeatedly exposed to artistic expressions of morally good patterns, then their minds will become morally good and they will thereby do morally good actions when they mature. If they are repeatedly exposed to artistic expressions of morally bad patterns, then their minds will become morally bad and they will thereby do morally bad actions when they mature. It is *simply* the repeated exposure to these representations that causes the young to become morally good or bad. (*Republic* III.401b-402a)

People often speak nowadays of the importance of having good role models for the young, since *all the young can do* is imitate the role models they have. For this exact same reason, Plato would say, remove the Confederate monuments from the public sphere because they will make our children morally bad given that they represent the morally bad pattern of white supremacy.

Plato's theory seems quite plausible and has seemed quite plausible to many educators, parents, and social reformers throughout the ages, both before and after Plato argued for it.

Socrates' Theory

Socrates would agree with Plato that it would be best for us to remove the Confederate monuments from our public squares but not *simply* because the repeated exposure to them causes our young to become morally bad people. Socrates would deny that the young, or anyone, learn *simply* from the repeated exposure to patterns. He would argue, as against Plato, that even in the young, reason is required for learning. Simply being exposed to some pattern is not sufficient for making the person become similarly patterned, even if one is exposed to a pattern many, many times.

Socrates would argue that a person, even a young person, has to reason about what their experience is in order for its pattern to become integrated into their minds. Why? First, Socrates thinks that experiences are multifaceted, that is, manifest multiple patterns. That is why examples are always bad *explanations* of what something is even if they are good *illustrations*. For example, suppose my 4-year old daughter asks me what the color red is, and I show her a red book and say: "*This* is what the color red is." She might easily reply: "Ah, I see, the color red is something that is rectangular. Got it dad, thanks!" And she wouldn't be wrong to have that thought that given that the book *is in fact rectangular*. Suppose I respond by simply showing her the book again and saying: "No no, see, *red*." tapping on the cover of the book. Again, she might easily reply: "Ah, I see, the color red a thing that makes a noise when you tap it. Got it dad. Thanks!" To which I respond: "No no, see, *red!*" giving it to her. And again, she says, after licking it, "Ah, OK, now I've got it! Red is something that tastes bad when you lick it." Clearly, I

have failed to *explain* to her what the color red is, if all I do is show her an example, even a *true* example, of red, *given that any true example of red will also be a true example of many other things*. No, I have to do more than *just* show her red things. I have to point out to her intellect what makes this book a true example of red *as opposed to* what makes this book a true example of rectangularity or a true example of hardness and so on, namely, its reflecting the longest wavelength of visible light. That's what the color red is – reflecting the longest wavelength of visible light – and I can help her to understand that by asking her to make an *inference* about what multiple red things *have* in common, for example, by showing her a red book, a red apple, and a red leaf, *by way of contrast* with what those three things, say, do *not* have in common. In other words, in order to understand what red is, she has to use her reason to *differentiate* what the things she sees *have* in common *from* what the things she sees do *not* have in common. It is not simply that I keep showing her red things, but that I give her experiences to reason about. Specifically, she can use her reason to discern what these rectangular, spherical and tear-shaped things have in common *as opposed to* what they do not have in common. Only reasoning, then, can produce a *this-as-opposed-to-that* judgment, which is required for understanding, that is, learning, including moral learning, according to Socrates.

Socrates, then, would agree that artistic expressions that represent morally bad things like white supremacy should be removed from our public square. But, unlike Plato, Socrates would suggest that they be placed into a museum, and not destroyed, where the relevant context and explanation could be offered so that people seeing them could come to understand *why* what these monuments represent, namely, white supremacy, is morally bad. Since explanations always require, according to Socrates, starting from where the student is coming, it will be necessary to figure out from where each student is coming and then explain why white supremacy is bad from

that angle. Socrates thinks that to know something is to be able to recognize it no matter how it appears. And so, to the extent one knows any thing, to that extent one will be able to recognize that thing no matter how it appears. One will not be fooled, then, by the different ways the thing one knows can appear. For example, if one knows the theory of refraction, one will not respond to seeing a stick in water with “Wow, did you see how the water bent that stick!”. Someone who responds that way clearly does not know the theory of refraction, even if they can recite the theory from having memorized it.

In Socrates’ day, the public square might have been a place where people engaged in critical discussion and so, Socrates might not have supported the removal of monuments that represent morally bad things. If there were people in public squares who engaged critically about what monuments represented and did likewise with why certain ideas are bad for society, then perhaps such things could be kept in public. But since our public squares are not places where such discussions occur, we need specially designated areas in which to have these discussions. Therefore, Socrates would argue that we need museums to house the Confederate monuments and the museums need to be able to explain the moral badness of white supremacy from many different perspectives, including that of a child. And since doing so always involves reasoning, just more or less complex reasoning, depending upon how complex the learner can reason, Socrates would advocate that these museums have not what museums typically have, namely, small labels that just give a sentence or paragraph about the work, but instead would have philosophers on staff to engage the visitor in a Socratic *elenchus*, that is, a holistic cross-examination of the visitor.

Socrates’ Theory is better than Plato’s

As I said at the outset, I think that Socrates' explanation of learning is better than Plato's. I think that the issue between them concerns the nature of actions and what is required in order to explain how human beings succeed in doing them. But in order to see that issue, we need to start with the nature of desire.

Socrates thinks that the psychological states that cause all of our actions are thought-dependent desires and not thought-independent desires. What is a thought-dependent desire? A thought-dependent desire is a desire that fluctuates in strength depending upon how good or bad the agent *thinks or knows* the object will be for them. So, the more good I think or know an object will be for me, the stronger my desire for that object will be. The less good I think or know an object will be for me, the weaker my desire for that object will be. Socrates thinks that every action has this sort of desire, and only this sort, for its cause. How does he think this works, exactly?

Socrates thinks that every human being wants *whatever* is in fact *ultimately* best for themselves. This generalized desire for *whatever* is in fact ultimately best for me causes my intellect, at every moment, to reason about the perceptions I am having, at that moment, in order to calculate what is in fact best for me to do, all things considered. And because this is an all-things-considered judgment, it is thereby a judgment concerning what is *not* best for me to do, specifically, every other option open to me given the way the world is. Once I come to a conclusion about which specific course of action is in fact best for me, that conclusion, i.e., that course of action, gets substituted into my previously general desire for whatever is best and my desire becomes a particular desire to do that action (and also *not* any other action). That particular desire is the cause of my doing whatever it is that I do (and also whatever it is that I do *not* do). Socrates thinks that this intellectualist explanation explains all human actions.

Plato, on the other hand, argues in Book IV of the *Republic* (at 436a-441c) that not all desire is for the good. Some desires are for external objects regardless of whether or not they are good. So, hunger is a desire that is just for food. Not good food or hot food, but just for food. Thirst is a desire that is just for drink. Lust is a desire that is just for sex. And Plato thinks that these desires, these thought-independent desires, which he calls “appetites”, fluctuate in strength *just* based upon hormones, that is, completely independent of what one thinks or knows, and that these desires can in fact *also* be the causes of our actions. So, my thought-dependent desire can be for what I think is best for myself but since I also have thought-independent desires, which vary in strength independently of how good or bad I think that the object or action is for me, I could act contrary to what I think or know to be best for me if my thought-independent desire is stronger than the my thought-dependent desire. The assumption here is that humans always do whatever their strongest desire at the moment is. It just depends upon which desire, thought-dependent or thought-independent, is strongest at that moment. Let me give an example.

I claim to know that I should not eat a $\frac{3}{4}$ pound of Nacho-cheese flavored Doritos in one sitting. I claim this because I have done it countless times and every time, I regret doing so. I say that the pleasure of doing so was not worth the pain I got later. So, when I go to the grocery store, I avoid the chip aisle. This action is explained by the fact that my thought-dependent desire that I not buy and then eat any $\frac{3}{4}$ pound bags of Nacho-cheese-flavored Doritos is stronger than my thought-independent desire, my appetite or craving, to eat Doritos. So far so good. But then, while I’m reaching down to get my milk in the milk department, I notice an attractive Doritos’ display (in the milk department!) containing several $\frac{3}{4}$ pounds bags of Nacho-cheese flavored Doritos. I then notice a craving, that is, a thought-independent desire, in my body for them. It gets stronger. I tell myself, no, I do not want to eat those Doritos. But then my hands start to get

sweaty. I start to tremble. My heart leaps. I then find myself uncontrollably moving over to where the Doritos are and I grab one of the bags and start eating. This is supposed to be a typical example of someone having knowledge of what is best being overcome by a passion, or thought-independent desire, to do the opposite. I knew that I should not do the action but my thought-independent desire to eat the Doritos got stronger and stronger until it was stronger than my thought-dependent desire to not eat the Doritos, at such time it caused me to move over to the attractive Doritos display and and make me eat the entire $\frac{3}{4}$ pound bag of Nacho-cheese flavored Doritos.

Here's the question: *how* did this craving, this thought-independent desire, for Doritos *make* my legs and arms and hands perform the action which brought the bag to my shopping cart wherein I could eat its intensely pleasant contents in their entirety? It is not enough of an explanation to say that the thought-independent desire occurred *simultaneously* with a belief concerning the location of the Doritos. Pointing to those two psychological states is explanatorily insufficient because it does not tell you why *just those* two states get acted on *and no other* belief-desire pairs which also occur simultaneously with that first pair of states. Furthermore, it is explanatorily insufficient to say that a craving for Doritos is the cause of the behavior. Why? Because pointing to that craving has to explain *this* complex set of behaviors for *this* bag of Doritos and not just any bag of Doritos. If not, then why do I reach over to just *this* bag of Doritos instead of some *other* bag of Doritos further away in the chip aisle? The answer is that (1) I *think* that *the best way* to satisfy this craving for Doritos is to eat *these Doritos right here in front of me and not those farther away* and (2) this belief is then *integrated* into an initially indefinite thought-dependent desire to do whatever is best. The result of this integration is the thought-dependent desire *to eat these Doritos and not those other Doritos farther away*. And this

desire is what explains my eating *these* Doritos *rather* than *those*. In other words, any desire which is capable of bringing me all the way to action will have to be *integrated* with my beliefs, and so, have to be a thought-dependent desire. The problem with thought-independent desires, then, is that they cannot be *integrated* with my beliefs at all. If they could, they would not be thought-independent. But since they cannot, they could never function as the causes of *particular actions*, that is, a doing of *this rather than that*. And that is what we are trying to explain: not the desire to eat Doritos in general, but the eating of *these* Doritos and not *those* in the chip aisle.

Sure, thought-independent desires, that is, cravings or passions, could make someone sweat, tremble, flail about, but they could never get someone to do *this-rather-than-that*. Being able to do *this-and-not-that*, requires a calculation that *this* is *better* than *that*, and so, to do this and to not do that. Thought-independent desires can not be sensitive to any calculations because they are thought-independent. They are desires just for the thing itself, regardless of any calculation. Just to make the point in another way, if you think, like Plato and Aristotle do, that children are similar to non-human animals in that neither are capable of reasoning, then neither can do any calculating as to what is worth trading for what. Socrates' problem with Plato's and Aristotle's and most thinkers on this issue since then is that since thought-independent, i.e., non-rational, desires cannot bring an agent all the way to action, where actions are understood to be complex means/ends hierarchies and not simple doings, we cannot appeal to such desires in explaining anyone's behavior. And if we cannot appeal to thought-independent desires in explaining anyone's behavior, then if we want to help people behave better, the *only* way to do so is to engage people, at any age, in intellectual discussion about why some things are in fact better for a person than other things.

Simply *showing*, or *not* showing, representations of moral goodness or badness is not going to be an effective way to educate anyone with the hope of influencing their later behaviors. Moreover, since children are going to see both kinds of examples in their lives at some point, they will be better off in dealing with those experiences in the future if they understand *why* those ways of interacting with other human beings are in fact good or are in fact bad. If we do not help them to understand, intellectually understand, why white supremacy is bad for everyone, including white people, then it is quite likely that the child or the uneducated adult will make the wrong inference from what they see and hear, whether it be from some artistic expression, or from the White House, or from their so-called community leaders, or from their parents, or from their so-called friends, or from Hollywood, or from their so-called religious leaders, or from their so-called teachers or professors. And if they make the wrong inference about what is in fact good or bad to do, then they will act incorrectly when the situation arises.

So, can artistic expressions of morally good or bad patterns affect the moral goodness or badness of a person? Plato thought that they could if young people were repeatedly exposed to them and thereby became similarly patterned. Socrates would have disagreed that anyone's mind could become imprinted like that without an intellectual component. And so, according to Socrates, he would not have thought that artistic expressions could, all by themselves, make someone morally good or bad. However, Socrates would have nonetheless supported the removal of the Confederate monuments. Why? Socrates would have agreed with Plato that artistic expressions can provide us with representations of moral goodness or badness. However, since a monument is a public *endorsement* of what it represents, a Confederate monument misleads someone into *thinking* that white supremacy is a good idea. Just as when a parent does something over and over again, their child is *inferring* that because *someone they trust* is recommending the

thing they do over and over again that it is in fact a good thing to do. People, likewise, tend to trust the communities they grow up and live in and when those communities memorialize something, the members of those communities *infer* that the thing being memorialized is *worthy* of being memorialized. People *infer* that from those monuments. So, Socrates would say, if you don't want to destroy a representation of moral badness, then put it into a context where no one will wrongly make that inference but will instead, due to the intellectual education happening while looking at it, make the correct inference that these monuments represent something harmful to any human society because they will understand why white supremacy is harmful to everyone. According to Socrates, it is only in conjunction with intellectual discourse and education that any artistic expression of an example of moral goodness or badness could be formative in anyone's moral development. Artistic expressions are only, at best, illustrations or examples of the true natures of things. Examples can be helpful in learning, but only when integrated with an intellectual education, and never all by themselves.

I have argued that I think Socrates may have gotten it right, at least as compared with Plato's non-intellectual explanation and with all those who agree with Plato, as, for example, Aristotle, and many others throughout history including many thinkers of today. Socrates' explanation gives us a more laborious path as it requires fine-grained intellectual engagement between teachers and students and between parents and their children and between citizen and citizen. A non-intellectual so-called education in terms of habituation is too coarse-grained to do any of us any good. We must engage with our children, and with each other, intellectually if we are to help our children, or any of us, become morally better people.

6 Plato and Socrates on Confederate Monuments: A commentary on Scott Berman's Plato, Socrates, and Confederate Monuments

Laurence Rohrer

Professor Berman's paper is thought provoking and offers good reasons to support the removal of confederate monuments, as well as make a case for their placement into museums to offer future generations a critical perspective of about racist expression. A second function of his paper is to contrast the thought of Plato and Socrates in respect to how they would have explained why such forms of expression are dangerous to society. In this portion of the paper he discusses their differing perspectives on the nature of desire. I would like to briefly address this comparison.

Professor Berman argues that unlike Plato, Socrates did not believe that any of the psychological states that cause all of actions are thought-independent states. This seems to be in part at least an empirical claim. Now it is not my purpose to question whether Socrates did believe this, but rather to wonder why Professor Berman thinks that this belief constitutes part of the *better* approach to the overall issue of the dangers of immoral examples such as confederate monuments, than the approach taken by Plato. A great deal of psychological research points to the reality that many thought-independent states can and do influence our actions, and more to the point, influence what will occur to us in our thinking at any given time. On the other hand, it is not I think unfair to Plato, to point out that Plato did indeed overemphasize the thought-independent role of the appetites, and Professor Berman is correct to highlight this point.

Another way to look at the problem of learning that is highlighted in Professor Berman's analysis, would be to acknowledge that we have both thought-dependent and thought independent influences in our behavior, and for this reason, such symbols as confederate

monuments are double trouble because they can influence us in ways that may persist, even when we have done much to engage in critical reflection and debate regarding institutionalized racism. With this in mind, I think that Professor Berman and I would both agree, that we can learn a great deal from Socrates and Plato, regarding the intersection between moral error and artistic expression, and I thoroughly enjoyed his presentation.

7 What Good are Stories? Literary Understanding and Moral Imagination

Stephen Chamberlain

What good are stories? That is, what impact do stories have upon us such that they might make us better people? What role can stories play in our moral development, in the cultivation (or perhaps, corruption) of our characters? Plato, as we heard in an earlier paper, was deeply impressed by the power of story, and more generally of the arts, recognizing their capacity to mold our characters, particularly those whose imaginations are most impressionable, namely, the youth. For this reason, Plato advocated a vigilant censorship upon which stories should be permitted to be told in his ideal republic; he even goes so far as to suggest that the poets themselves not be admitted, given that the nature of their work, as imitative, is twice removed from reality, truth, and goodness.

However, despite Plato's seemingly harsh critique of poetry (which, we can interpret here as "literature"), it should not be forgotten that in the final book of the *Republic*, Plato also says, in his customary open-minded manner, that if anyone can provide reasons for the beneficial value of literature, he is more than willing to listen. Plato states, "(L)et us admit, that, if the poetry whose end is to please . . . , can give any reasons to show that they ought to exist in the well-ordered city, we for our part will gladly welcome them home again. . . And I suppose we shall also allow those of her patrons who are lovers of poetry, without being poets, to advocate her cause in prose by maintaining that poetry is not only pleasurable, but also beneficial in its bearings upon governments, and upon human life" (*The Republic*, 606d).

It is the aim of this paper to do just that: to provide, in prose, reasons for why poetry, or, more generally, *stories* can be beneficial as well as pleasurable. Or, to employ more precise

philosophical terminology, that stories do not merely have *aesthetic* value insofar as they entertain us by evoking a sensory and imaginative enjoyment (which no one, I think, denies), but also that stories can have an *ethical* as well as *cognitive* or *epistemic* import. In fact, I argue that stories disclose a kind of ethical knowledge or *moral understanding*. In making this argument, I will rely upon some key concepts and principles in the philosophy of Plato's famous student and later colleague and friend, Aristotle.

1. Preliminary Points

Before turning specifically to Aristotle, however, a few preliminary points need to be clarified. First, when using the term "story," what I mean is what most contemporary scholars refer to as "literary fiction." By "fiction" is meant merely a non-factual narrative, typically taking the form of a novel, short story, or drama (play), though it would also include the epic poem. By "literary" is meant a "serious" work intended by the author to convey something of more cognitive or intellectual significance than mere entertainment.

Secondly, in arguing that some works of literary fiction provide moral understanding, I am not claiming that *all* works of literary fiction, to be considered as such, must convey this kind of understanding. Peter Lamarque, an influential contemporary philosopher of literature, argues that because there are clearly some stories that fall under the category of "literary fiction" that do not convey a kind of understanding considered as a form of truth or knowledge, then there must be some other quality or defining characteristic that distinguishes a work to be literary as such. Noel Carroll, however, has pointed out that just because there are certain essential features that make, for example, a motor vehicle a motor vehicle, that does not prohibit us from identifying those specific features exhibited in sports cars; for instance, the capacity to hold the road at a sharp

angle and high speed is a necessary feature of a good sports car but not of a good utility van. Similarly, Carroll argues, there is a sub-class or species of literary fiction (what he recalls realist literature) that provides moral understanding such that this feature need not be necessary or essential quality of *all* works of literary fiction, though it is for realist literature.

Thirdly, whenever one ventures into the realm of cross-disciplinary studies, one typically receives criticism from both sides of the aisle. As to the question of whether fictional literature can convey a kind of truth or knowledge, many contemporary philosophers of literature are skeptical. They are skeptical for the seemingly obvious reason that if a literary work purports to be *fictional* (i.e., non-factual), then clearly its forfeiting its right to be called a “true story.” After all, does not the very term “fictional” means “not true,” “not real,” etc.? On the other side of the aisle, many contemporary literary critics also do not like to use the “t-word” (truth) in relation to literature. For gone are the days of Plato and Aristotle when literature (and art in general) is thought to be mimetic, that is, an imitation or representation of nature or reality. Rather, literature as creative art produces its own autonomous world; hence, such a world, as original, has its own rules and values, ones that are not referable or reducible to the real world. Such reference, these literary theorists argue, restricts the freedom of the creative work in producing its imaginary world: after all, in fiction, poetic license permits witches to fly on broomsticks, superheroes to stop speeding bullets with their hands, etc. To refer aspects drawn from the imaginary world back to the real world is, therefore, a confusion, or what philosophers call a category mistake. Given the arguments of philosophers of literature and literary critics alike, it would seem, then, that when discussing the value of stories, we should refrain from the suggestion that what they offer is any kind of knowledge or truth, be it ethical or otherwise.

And yet, despite the heady arguments of these mostly analytic and postmodern theoreticians, there remains a problem: namely, the fact that many of us, as Martha Nussbaum, in echoing David Copperfield, puts it, “read for life,” That is, we read works of literary fiction, both past and present, that do not merely provide aesthetic pleasure by expressing something original, but also convey something of practical significance concerning ourselves, our world, and how we are to live. In short, they teach us something about life. This insight is what John Gibson calls the “humanist intuition.” And yet, the skeptics ask, “how is such so-called understanding manifested?” (2007). How do we explain the structure, or what John Searle calls “the mechanisms” (Searle), by which such understanding (considered as a kind of truth) is supposedly conveyed through works of fiction? I will offer a suggestion, but first let us probe deeper into the philosophical problem of “fictional truth.”

2. The Problem of “Fictional Truth”

Many contemporary analytic philosophers are skeptical about assigning cognitive value or truth claims to works of fiction because of both the form and the content of our expressions of truth. In terms of its form, truth must be expressed, they argue, through statements or propositions. For example, we state *that* “George Washington was the first president of the United States” (an historical truth); we state *that* “water boils at 212 degrees Fahrenheit” (a scientific truth); or we state *that* “Something cannot be X and not X at the same time, place, manner, etc.” (a philosophical or logical truth). But what exactly, the skeptics ask, is the truth *that can be stated* through reading a work of fiction? I will consider this question below, but first, in terms of its content, it is also not clear whether the truth expressed through fiction is a *particular* or *universal* truth. History, for instance, is aimed at revealing particular truths. What happened, how it happened, why it happened, etc. The “it” here is a particular, factual event,

person, period, etc. – the Revolutionary War, the life of George Washington, the Renaissance.

The other two kinds of truth presented above (scientific and logical) are general or universal laws or principles. To be sure, we can give examples or instantiations of these laws or principles that experientially illustrate or provide empirical evidence for these truths. We can put a pot of water on the stove and then take its temperature when it begins to boil. We can make statements like “it is raining outside right now” and “it is not raining outside right now” to show the logical absurdity of conjoining these two statements. But, in both cases, in presenting the *truth*, we make general or universal statements, that is, we move from the particular to the universal – or, in Aristotle’s terms, we *abstract* the universal truth from the particular instances.

Now what about so-called “fictional truths”? The form of fiction as a narrative typically unfolds in a description of particular persons in particular places undergoing particular experiences. For example, Elizabeth Bennett meets Mr. Darcy at Netherfield in *Pride and Prejudice* and the story unfolds from there. The description of these particulars, however, are obviously not intended to refer to some actual, historical or factual reality. The described events did not *really* happen. Hence, fiction, though describing a narrative of particular persons, places, events does not refer to any particular, factual persons, events, etc. They are, as some critics put it, “self-referential.” It seems, then, if there are truths revealed through literary fiction, they must be more general or universal in terms of their content.

Now there are some contemporary philosophers who take up this line of reasoning and so defend a kind of literary truth by arguing that content of the propositional truth disclosed through literature is psychological or ethical. What we learn from fiction is something universal about human nature, our world, or how we should (or should not) live. Although I think they are right in terms of the content of this truth, they are wrong, I argue, in terms of the form. For the

problem, as the skeptics point out, is that whenever one tries to *state* in propositional form the universal truth that is revealed through a particular work, one finds that the seemingly profound and deep truth revealed through literature becomes rather trivial or banal when abstracted from the rich, detailed complexity of the story. For example, what psychological or ethical truth might we learn from reading Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*? Well, we might learn the truth that "pride and prejudice keep otherwise attractive and intelligent people apart" (Stolnitz). Or, what might we learn from Sophocles's play, *Antigone*? We might learn the truth that "hubris leads to human downfall," or, "pride goes before fall." When stated in such a bald straight-forward manner, however, the seemingly profound literary truth becomes overly simplistic, even trivial. Too much of what makes the story a good story seems to be left out. Moreover, one can argue that we did not even *learn* such commonplace truths from reading the novel or play, we merely see these truths (which we already knew from previous experience) illustrated or exhibited in the literary works. So, the real value of these literary works – what interests and holds our attention – is the subtle, nuanced description of the particulars, that is, the specific characters, settings, and scenes, the complicated interactions, relationships, intrigues, and arguments between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennett, between Creon, Antigone, and Haemon.

We can see, then, the problem of trying to defend the claim for fictional truth in terms of the *form*, that is, as stated in a proposition. But not all philosophers, who defend literary truth, argue that the psychological or ethical truths disclosed through literary fiction must be expressed in propositional form. Rather, they (and I include myself among them) argue that literary truth is *sui generis*, that is, literary truth possesses its own unique epistemic structure such that it cannot be measured according to the models and methodologies of other forms of truth, namely, historical, scientific, philosophical, and so forth. What then is this structure?

3. Aristotle and the Universal in the Particular

Let us now turn to Aristotle. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle makes the following well known statement:

(T)he poet's task is to speak not of events which have occurred, but of the kind of events which could occur . . . It is for this reason that poetry is both more philosophical and more serious than history, since poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars. A 'universal' comprises the *kind* of speech or action which belongs by probability or necessity to a certain *kind* of character – something which poetry aims at *despite* its addition of particular names (*Poetics*, 1151a36-1151b10).

Here we find Aristotle making the surprising claim that fiction is more universal and serious than fact. Why? Because the 'universal' revealed through literary fiction comprises the *kind* of speech or *kind* of action which belongs to a certain *kind* of character. In reading literary fiction, in other words, we understand that the characters, the situation, the actions, as types or kinds, represent more than the themselves as particulars; hence, they are more universal. But if fictional truths are to some extent universal, are they structurally the same as scientific and philosophical truths? In other words, can the universal truth be abstracted from the particulars and in turn stated in bald propositional form? I argue not.

Given the above passage, it is not uncommon for those who defend a form of literary truth in relation to Aristotle to speak of the universal *in* the particular. But what exactly does this illusive notion mean? To explain, let us first look at an important conceptual distinction made by Aristotle. In Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes between theoretical reason (*episteme*) and practical reason (*phronesis*). The distinction between these two modes of reason is determined by the distinct objects or ends toward which reason is directed in its thinking. The aim of theoretical thinking is universal knowledge for its own sake. The aim of

practical thinking is a concrete decision and in turn specific action in the present situation, the here and now.

Now the difference in ends is what determines the distinct realm toward which reason is directed. We can say the realm or focus of theoretical reason is the universal. Particulars are often involved in theoretical reasoning but in service to the universal (as instantiations or empirical evidence). For example, I undertake my experiments in the science lab and from the particular, empirical evidence that is gathered I conclude *that* water boils at 212 degrees Fahrenheit. In contrast, in practical reasoning, universal principles (as major premises) are involved but in service to the particular. In principle, I know that cheating is wrong; so, when presented with the particular opportunity to cheat on my exam, I apply this principle in the present situation and so choose, hopefully, not to cheat. Hence, it is not knowledge *of* the universal that is ultimately sought for in practical thinking but rather the *application* of the universal *to* the specific situation. Now if it were that simple, practical decision-making would be easy. Aristotle, however, recognized that typically situations are quite complicated; hence, the difficulty we often have in knowing what the right thing to do is, given the complex circumstances. For this reason, Aristotle thinks that in the practical realm, although we apply universal principles, it is the ability to read the particulars of the situation that is most important. So, knowing the right thing to do in a situation requires not only that the agent possesses true universal principles but also that the agent has the correct *perception* of the relevant particulars in the given situation. Hence, the practically wise person is the one who reads a particular situation correctly and so responds appropriately. A general on the battlefield, must possess the right strategic principles, but ultimately he needs to read the situation correctly so as to apply the principles of wartime appropriately.

This is one of the significant advances Aristotle made over his teacher Plato, who seemed to think that a purely rational or theoretical knowledge of universal values and principles is sufficient to do the right thing. For Plato, as well as for many contemporary ethicists who follow in the Kantian and utilitarian traditions, pure reason needs to move beyond imaginative and emotional engagement in order to discern the right thing to do. In such conceptions, imagination and emotion are viewed as obstacle or threats to correct ethical discernment and practical decision making.

In contrast, for Aristotle practical reasoning necessarily requires imaginative and emotional engagement in a way that abstract, theoretical reasoning does not. For Aristotle held that the faculty of imagination (*phantasia*) is not primarily the capacity to create new images but rather the ability to perceive salient and subtle aspects of concrete particulars (*aisthesis*). A *phronisimos* or practical wise person will possess an acute and vivid imagination insofar as she perceives the subtle nuances of a complex situation; this is what enables her to read the situation appropriately. Just as a painter will look at a natural landscape and see subtle shades of color that escape the untrained eye, so too the practically wise person possesses an alert imaginative sensitivity to the relevant particulars of the situation.

Moreover, for Aristotle, in practical reasoning, emotional responsiveness is not detached from, let alone a detriment to, rational cognition; rather emotional responsiveness is intimately and necessarily connected to ethical discernment. In fact, the appropriate emotional response to a given concrete situation is both a sign *of* understanding as well as a means *to* understanding. For instance, the appropriate emotional response to a loved one's death is a sign that the bereaved truly knows the loved one has died. Without the emotional response, the awareness of the loved one's death seems too abstract and so lacking something. Nussbaum says,

Good perception is a full recognition or acknowledgement of the nature of the practical situation; the whole personality sees it for what it is. The agent who discerns intellectually that a friend is in need or that a loved one has died, but who fails to respond to these facts with appropriate sympathy or grief, clearly lacks a part of Aristotelian virtue. It seems right to say, in addition, that a part of discernment or perception is lacking. This person doesn't really, or doesn't fully, *see* what has happened, doesn't recognize it in a full-blooded way or take it in. We want to say that she is merely saying the words. "He needs my help," or "she is dead," but really doesn't yet fully *know* it, because the emotional part of cognition is lacking.¹

What Nussbaum is describing here, then, is kind of cognition or knowledge that is not purely rational or intellectual, but one that requires the whole person insofar as it involves imaginative and emotional engagement. Such an engagement is what connects literature, and particularly the novel, to practical wisdom. For the same kind of vision or perception is required in reading and engaging the particulars of a fictional situation.

The Aristotelian agent is a person whom we could trust to describe a complex situation with full concreteness of detail and emotional shading, missing nothing of practical relevance. . . But this means that the person of practical wisdom lies surprisingly close to the artist and/or the perceiver of art, not in the sense that this conception reduces moral value to aesthetic value or makes moral judgment a matter of taste, but in the sense that we are asked to see morality as a high type of vision of and response to the particular, an ability that we seek and value in our greatest artists, and especially our novelists, whose value for us is above all practical and never detached from our questions about how to live.²

In literary fiction, what we attain is a certain moral vision that is sufficiently nuanced so that it can say something of significance concerning how we are to live. Although Nussbaum is helpful in linking imagination and emotion to practical reasoning, my own view is that she makes too quick a leap from literary understanding to practical wisdom in a way that is similar to how Plato leapt too quickly from theoretical knowledge to practical wisdom. For Aristotle, to be practically wise, i.e., virtuous, it is not enough to know the good (theoretically), we must do the

¹ Martha Nussbaum, "The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality," *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 79.

² *Ibid.*, 84.

good, that is practice the good such that we habituate our dispositions into a strong, stable, virtuous character. The same holds for literary understanding. For although certain stories do convey practical knowledge about ourselves and our world, concerning how we are to live, I do not think the writing, reading, and discussing of stories is sufficient to make us good people. For, as Aristotle, insists we ultimately must *act* upon such knowledge. That said, I do think certain stories can provide *moral understanding* as a specific kind of truth or knowledge that is distinct from theoretical knowledge, one that is necessary though not sufficient, in making us better people. What is the difference?

In chapter 10 of Bk. VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle discusses the notion of *sunesis* or understanding. He explains that understanding is distinct from both theoretical knowledge (*episteme*) and practical knowledge (*phronesis*). First, understanding is distinct from theoretical knowledge in that (like practical wisdom) understanding is directed toward the concrete realm of particulars. In other words, understanding is contextual or situational rather than general. At the same time, however, the object or end of understanding is not decision and concrete action; rather its aim (like theoretical reason) is *learning*; hence, its end is a kind of knowledge for its own sake. Although concerned with the same things as practical wisdom, namely, the particulars of a concrete situation, we recognize in those particulars something of significance concerning how we are to live our lives. Such understanding terminates not in a concrete choice (I will do x), but in a judgment (in this situation, x is the appropriate or inappropriate action by character Y because of factors, a, b, c, etc.) We analyze the particular situation in order to understand it and in doing so learn something of significance in regard to ourselves, our world, and so forth. Hence, when making the appropriate judgment what we learn is kind of situational truth. That is,

in this *kind* of situation, with these *types* of characters, such and such actions are good or not good.

As we saw with practical wisdom, understanding also involves emotional responsiveness (e.g., sympathy) in a way that theoretical reason does not. Aristotle explains that the person of understanding is one who is sympathetic in her judgments. “Sympathetic judgment,” Aristotle states, “is judgment which discriminates what is equitable and does so correctly; and correct judgment is that which judges what is true” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1143a22-24).

Here, then, we can begin to see the outlines of the structure of that illusive notion of the “universal in the particular.” To truly grasp the meaning of a story one must imaginatively and emotionally identify with the characters and scenes in the story. The good storyteller provides a vivid and nuanced description that draws us into the story. At the same, we also are cognitively aware that these particulars represent something more than themselves as particulars. We see in these actions, characters, events, and situations something of ourselves and our own possibilities. Once more, a quote from Nussbaum:

[O]ne of the things that makes literature something deeper and more central for us than a complex game . . . is that it speaks . . . *about us*, about our lives and choices and emotions, about our social existence and the totality of our connections. As Aristotle observed, it is deep, and conducive to our inquiry about how to live, because it does not simply (as history does) record that this or that event happened; it searches for patterns of possibility – of choice, and circumstance, and the interaction between choice and circumstance – that turn up in human lives with such a persistence that they must be regarded as *our* possibilities. And so our interest in literature becomes . . . cognitive: an interest in finding out (by seeing and feeling and otherwise perceiving) what possibilities . . . life offers to us, what hopes and fears for ourselves it underwrites or subverts.³

³ Martha C. Nussbaum, “Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, 171.

Such possibilities for our lives, considered as situational truths, are not demonstrated through rational analysis and argument (as in philosophy) or through the collection and computation of empirical data (as in science); rather these possible, situational truths are shown to us through the story. The truth is demonstrated through the vicarious lived experience we undergo in engaging whole heartedly in the story. In Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, for example, we imaginatively identify with a man who built his life on the values of pleasure, power, and propriety, sacrificing along the way, any deep meaningful relationships he might have had with his family and colleagues. When struck down by an unexplainable illness, Ivan is forced to confront his mortality and through this ordeal, he learns that his life was not "the Real Thing." That somehow, he had been deluded and had missed out on it, on real life. The cathartic recognition of this horrible and tragic truth happens on his death bed, in the final pages of the story. And yet, it is not only Ivan, who recognizes this tragic truth, but we as readers as well. Having experienced the story through literary engagement, we learn this truth, not merely cognitively, but also emotionally, imaginatively. Apart from imaginative, emotional engagement, we cannot be said to truly *understand* the story and the good it reveals to us.

